A Geologist's Life in the Yukon

by

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The Rhodesian geologist's job in the Yukon begins in the Canadian Embassy. In its London immigration office in Grosvenor Square he jostles for hours with scores of potential British emigrants. Examination is thorough. Six weeks later, B.O.A.C. lands him in Montreal. Air Canada takes him to Vancouver. His new employers are friendly, but businesslike. Time is money. Next day he is on the "milkrun" to Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon.

Many geologists take this "milkrun" to the Yukon. Exploration activity in Canada in recent years has spread, particularly into the north, and geologists are in constant demand. While the academic sphere is limited to those with appropriate experience and high qualifications, and the Geological Survey is virtually a closed book to non-Canadians, mining and exploration companies offer a wide field.

The large mining companies are, for conditions and type of work, probably similar to the large companies of Southern Africa. Many have world-wide operations. Falconbridge Nickel is active in South Africa, Central and South America and Australia. Kennecott Copper is a major explorer in the Pacific Islands. Fifty per cent. of Noranda Mines Ltd.'s exploration funds are now being spent outside of Canada. A host of smaller companies offer a more limited range of experience, commonly on a producing property, and these may be in remote areas.

At the core are the consultants, centred in the major cities, but working throughout Canada and often outside the country. There are over 5,000 active and inactive mining exploration companies listed in the *Northern Miner's Handbook* of Canadian mining companies, as well as 14,000 which are no longer functioning. Geological reports on new companies are constantly required for the Securities Commission in their search for the less scrupulous, and for the shareholders in their eager hopes of backing the rich one — a considerable field for consultant geologists. Such firms employ unmarried geologists of limited experience to carry out a wide variety of basic exploration work — claim staking, geophysical and geochemical survey, diamond drill supervision, mapping and so on. Though such work does not tax geological knowledge to any great degree, it does give a good insight into the Canadian mining world from prospector to promoter, and the opportunity to travel in a short period, at no cost, over considerable areas of the extensive and varied terrain of Canada.

The "milkrun" is a semi-derogatory term used because the aircraft (a) is not jet-engined (D.C. 6B); and (b) has four stops before its destination. It is, nevertheless, big enough for four pretty hostesses and a fair sprinkling of the mining community in these far north territories — drillers, promoters, oilmen, vacation job students. On a crisp August morning out of Vancouver, snow peaks of British Columbia lie below with misty valleys and a few thousand square miles of coniferous forest. This is the Cordilleran region, a mountainous belt of country some 500 miles wide, with the Pacific on the west, the prairies to the east and all of the Yukon Territory in its scenery. First stop is Prince George, centre of a vast lumber industry and smelling of sulphite; Fort St. Johns — edge of the prairies and a natural gas field; Fort Nelson; Watson Lake, a hunting centre; Whitehorse, capital of a territory of 205,346 square miles and hub of its exploration activity.

Yukon began with the fur trade. The first placer gold prospectors arrived in 1873 and fanned out over the rugged territory in search of the precious metal. On an historic day in August, 1896, George Carmack picked up a nugget from a tributary of the Klondike River and so started the Klondike gold rush, one of the greatest in mining history. Since that date the economy of Yukon Territory has been based on the mineral industry. At the junction of the Klondike and Yukon Rivers, the town of Dawson mushroomed up from "moose pasture". By 1901 there were 27,000 people in the Yukon, of whom nearly 10,000 were in Dawson. By 1931, the boom over, the population had fallen to 4,000, with only 800 in ghost city Dawson. A new growth of mineral wealth has once again increased the Yukon population, but Dawson continued to dwindle and today is a tourist attraction remnant of 400, like a set from "Paint Your Waggon", with boardwalks, old paddleboat steamer, the Flora Dora Hotel and Klondike Nugget Shop.

Today Yukon's settlement is concentrated in a dozen or so centres, widely separated by formidably rough territory. The summer canoe and winter dog team have been replaced by aircraft and the snowmobile, supplemented by a modest network of highways. For seven months of the year the territory is frozen and snowbound. By June mining companies begin to move their personnel into the areas of potential mineralization. Trucks head for Mayo, Ross River, out from Whitehorse. Float planes roar off the Yukon

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River for lakes in the north. Helicopters clatter their cargo of men and machines to the most inaccessible valleys of this mountainous region.

In summer the days are sunny and the thaw brings new streams tumbling into the valleys. Vast areas of the Canadian North are covered with lake and muskeg, and when the ice has gone these are breeding grounds for millions of mosquitoes and blackfly. Yukon, with its mountains, is more fortunate. Nevertheless, old Klondike legend spoke about "mosquitoes that carried off eagles as food for their young!"

Exploration work begins with geophysics — airborne and ground survey. Many parts of Canada have a heavy surface cover of unconsolidated glacial deposits, and in the northern regions the ground is permanently frozen. Geochemistry is less successful in such terrain. As the summer gets under way, drill teams move in to probe the anomalies and achieve maximum footage before the first snow of October.

When the land freezes again, companies gradually move south against the cold front to prospects in British Columbia. The frozen terrain is not entirely unhelpful. Geophysical teams can penetrate by snowmobile and snowshoe, and areas of frozen marsh are now accessible to the diamond drill.

With the New Year, temperatures find their minima and mining activity is expensive and minimal as well. The mercury settles around zero (Fahrenheit) with colder snaps of minus 40 to 50 degrees. A little settlement at Snag, on the Yukon's border with Alaska, recorded the North American winter record one early February with 81.3 below zero. Geologists are back in Vancouver, southern B.C., perhaps down in Arizona or Nevada. The less qualified may fare less well. On benches in downtown Vancouver sit the forlorn and aging unemployed, waiting again for the summer logging camps and exploration crews, a sober reminder that, in this continent of North America, qualifications have become a necessity, no longer a luxury, one of the many lessons that make a year in the mining world of the Yukon a worthwhile and valuable experience.

Yukon moves into the seventies with the accent on base metal exploration. Gold production has now faded. Silver, lead, zinc deposits dominate, with the important centres of Keno Hill, Vangorda, Ross River. Copper is in production near Whitehorse, and asbestos is a new potential. Others lie unawakened in this pioneer land of the Aurora Borealis, the midnight sun, and the Klondike.

Ten Years of F. J. Crynge

At the beginning of each year dozens of ignorant first year students, and occasionally members of staff, ask the question, "Who or what is F. J. Crynge?" Those who know Fred find this a difficult question to answer — Fred is all things to all people — a pillar of the Geology Department and also a pillar of the bar. When asked to describe him, most people hesitate and probably eventually come down to, "Oh, an ordinary sort of bloke — not the sort you'd notice — not very bright, but an excellent chap." In truth Fred is a shy, retiring individual, not given to expounding on his considerable achievements, and eluding the attempts made by friendly individuals to get to know him. For all those who ask, "Who is F. J. Crynge?" and also for his friends, this, then, is the drama of Fred's life at the University of Rhodesia, starting on registration day, 1961.

Fred had wanted to do physics, maths and chemistry, but since by some strange mischance he had failed to satisfy the examiners in physics and maths (they weren't awfully happy about his chemistry either), the people at the desks suggested, "Why don't you go and talk to the gentleman with glasses sitting over there?" And so Fred became a geologist.

He enquired about the possibilities of studying mealie-growing for a third subject, being a practical, down-to-earth sort of man, but was told this was not possible. The authorities suggested basket-making or domestic science as alternatives, but Fred scorned these as unsuitable for a man of action, and so a deadlock was reached.

The merry year passed, with coffee in Swinton and evenings at the George breaking the monotony of rock-breaking, and it was only when exams came that the men at the top noticed that Fred still had no third subject. He failed chemistry and geology anyway, but managed to confuse the authorities by arguing that it might have been different if he had had three subjects like everyone else, and that they had led him astray by not providing him with a third. By hammering on his theme that "Practice makes perfect" he tried to persuade them that next time would be different, and when they appeared sceptical, suggested that as a logical alternative he should be promoted to second year, then the problems of the third subject wouldn't arise. And so, in 1962, Fred Jurassic Crynge entered second year geology and chemistry, and embarked on the first of a series of historic pilgrimages to Gokwe, to carve his name

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